



A LETTER

TO THE

REV. E. B. PUSEY, D.D.

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF HEBREW, AND CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH,

ON THE

PUBLICATION OF No. 90.

OF THE

TRACTS FOR THE TIMES.

BY

WILLIAM SEWELL, M.A.

PROFESSOR OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE UNIVERSITY
OF OXFORD.

OXFORD,

JOHN HENRY PARKER ;

J. G. F. AND J. RIVINGTON, LONDON,

1841.

MY DEAR PUSEY,

I have been told, that letters have been written to yourself and to others, expressing the opinions of individuals on the last-published Tract for the Times, No. 90. And in the position in which you are placed, it may be desirable that you should know as much as possible of the sentiments of those around you. With the feelings which I, like so many others, have always entertained towards yourself and the other Authors of the Tracts, I would not willingly leave you to learn my own sentiments from common report, which would probably misrepresent them. And however painful it is to differ from you, it seems to be my duty, for many reasons, to avow at once openly, that the publication of the Tract has caused me the most serious pain.

I may not be disposed to take precisely the same line of objection which has been taken by others. That the Articles were not intended as a body of dogmatical teaching, but as marks set upon certain existing errors, to warn us against them, leaving the whole space between them free and open, would appear to be an

obvious fact, recognized by our best divines, and perfectly in harmony with the true spirit of a Catholic Church. To treat the Articles as a regular system of theology, or to erect such a system and impose its reception by authority, would probably be a serious evil. But on a careful and repeated perusal of the Tract, it did to my own mind convey intimations, which if unintentionally suggested through incautious expressions, would still, at such a moment as the present, be most deeply to be lamented; and if intended, must be open to considerable discussion, and I will add, in my own view, to the gravest objections.

But I wish most distinctly and emphatically to state, that I am describing only the impression on my own mind, and not presuming to assert that I have caught the real meaning of the author. If I am mistaken, it will be a subject of great satisfaction. And the fact of my own misconception may prove an apology for others, who may have been similarly misled with myself.

I allude especially to the disparaging language in which the Articles appear to be spoken of,—the representation of them as a bondage, rather than as a safeguard,—and the suggestion, that their latitude, and so called ‘ambiguity,’ is an evil to be deprecated, and to be palliated for the present only by a forced strain of the grammatical meaning; instead of exhibiting these cha-

racteristics, especially in this place, in the true light of a most wise and charitable moderation, and a blessing for which we should be thankful.

Farther, it was difficult not to infer the contemplation in the mind of the writer of some future and unexplained changes in the external system of the Church. It is guarded indeed with certain conditions for the present, but with such as seem by no means sufficient to allay or restrain the natural discontent, and tendency to rash, restless reform, which must be created by the language in which the present condition of the Church is described; not as regards the sins of her individual members, (for in this no change can be enforced too earnestly,) but in her “formularies,” “precedents,” and “principles.” If the “body of death,” which we are now said to bear about, is applied to her system as established in “uncatholic times,” such is surely not the tone in which our greatest divines have been accustomed to speak of the Church of England, especially as distinguished from the Church of Rome. If it apply to any external oppression from the State, we have, individually, a simple remedy in the patient, obedient, but faithful and bold performance by each of us of our several duties, as they are enjoined on us by the express command of God; and any fetters with which the State has bound us will then become as flax, without any formal change in our ecclesiastical

constitution ; the contemplation of which, I should venture to think, is not to be encouraged, but to be most fervently deprecated.

In connexion with this point I cannot but feel uneasy at the palliating, and, if our older divines are right, the erroneous language in which the criminal usurpation of the Papacy is described, [p. 77.] simply ‘ as an event in Providence ;’ as ordained of God while it existed, and claiming our obedience, as involving no question of “ ought,” [p. 97.] either in obedience or resistance to it ; and as coming under the same description with the metropolitan and patriarchal systems. Barrow’s languageⁿ, for instance, is very different. And on a point of such vital importance, which may really form the great line of demarcation between the Church of England and Popery, incautious language is full of peril.

To these objections I cannot but add, the appearance of a general disposition to give scope and indulgence to a number of opinions, not essential to the faith of Christianity, and not warranted by sufficient evidence of their catholicity ; opinions, which are not indeed formally condemned by our Church, but of the dangerous tendency of which she has surely desired to warn us, by carefully excluding from our Church Services so many things which might encourage them. It is most true that our Church does not

ⁿ Treatise on the Pope’s Supremacy.

presume to shackle private opinions, beyond what is absolutely necessary for the preservation of the faith. But seeing the inevitable tendency of the mind to slide from private opinions into Romish errors, is it not wiser and more consistent with the spirit of that rule, under which God has placed us, to lead minds, and young minds especially, from indulging such opinions, to the grand indisputable truths of the Gospel, to the plain practical duties of life, and to an ardent and sincere devotion to our own Church as it is constituted?

Whatever are the evils and defects in the mode in which her system is administered by ourselves as individuals, surely she possesses amply sufficient in herself, without borrowing from such dangerous sources, to stimulate and indulge all that is good and safe in the imagination and affections. Perhaps the very contemplation of this as an object may be full of risk, and withdraw us from the simple task committed to us, of holding up the Catholic faith before men, and leaving in the hands of God its effect upon the heart. Our object as a Church, we must allow, is not to govern men, but to witness to the truth; and we know from a lamentable experience, how easy it is, when this ground is in the least shifted, to sink into most fatal errors.

I must think also, that although it is Christian

and prudent to speak reverently of the mysteries of religion, and leniently of the errors of others, when there is no risk of leading to their imitation, our present position in relation to the Church of Rome, and to many members of our own communion, is not such as to warrant any expression, or any silence, which may tend to throw weak minds off their guard, and make them insensible to the real enormities of the Romish system. And such does not appear to have been the tone adopted by those great men, who, we know, were able before this to maintain the highest doctrines of our Church, with the boast that none of their disciples had been tempted by them into the Communion of Rome.

And, lastly, though it is impossible to estimate too highly the value of the real Catholic Testimony of Antiquity to the essential Doctrines of Christianity, or to look without the highest veneration on the great Fathers of the Early Church, is it not dangerous to consider ourselves, or to lead others to consider themselves, as ‘Disciples of the Catholic Church,’ rather than as the dutiful and affectionate children of that branch of it, to which we immediately belong? May it not encourage a fanciful and even self-willed spirit, to throw them back upon a distant period of the Church, not for great truths which we are taught by our own Church, and are commanded by her to confirm by such testimony; but

for habits of thought and practice, difficult to be realized, impossible to be understood in all their bearings, unfitted, it may be, for our own state, and powerless for effecting the good which is hoped from them; the proof of which need only be sought in the state of society at the time, and in the evils which subsequently sprung from them? From what has come under my own observation, I do think it more than ever necessary to maintain, that our access to the ancient Church must be through the channel of our own English Church, and under the control of living rulers, as well as of written rules. Our vitality must indeed be drawn from Apostolical sources, but only as the leaf is nourished from the root, by adhering firmly to the branch on which it is growing.

I have touched on these heads generally, and should have explained my meaning at greater length, had I not found myself really unequal to the anxiety and labour of engaging in such a discussion, farther than seems absolutely necessary. The objections which I have stated may be groundless. But they have been forced on me, and may have been forced on others far more open to their influence. If readers least disposed to take offence are startled and pained by a work, must there not be something to complain of in the tone or form in which its opinions are put forth? As startling, they may rouse attention, but surely such cannot be a proper form in which religious

truth should be permitted to appear? We may indeed feel indifferent to the effect produced on one class of opponents ; but are there not tender and delicate minds, whose eyes are to be couched gradually, if they are in darkness, and for whose sake we are bound to be cautious? Does not any shock in religious opinion, even if in some instances it bring us to truth, unsettle the mind, and dispose it generally for the reception of paradoxes, and therefore of error? And would it not have been well, if a truth so obvious as that asserted in the Tract, had been put forward, without hazarding the creation of alarm and opposition ?

If you ask me why I have thought it necessary to say thus much, one reason is, that although I have never, as you know, been in the slightest degree connected with the Publication of the Tracts, and have always studiously avoided habits of intimacy with their authors, as fearing the creation of a party, I was once, as you have stated to me yourself, the means under Providence of considerably allaying the irritation and alarm, which had been raised against you and others, by false and silly charges. If I have ever maintained similar principles with the Tracts, it has been so far only as I believed them to be the principles of the Church of England. And in whatever I have hitherto done I have endeavoured to act independently, only desirous of guarding Truth, and, where I might do it without presumption, the characters of others against idle and malicious calumnies. What

I am now doing, I trust, will not be attributed to a different spirit. But I will venture to entreat you to consider, whether under present circumstances, the continuation of the Tracts is not pregnant with danger to the cause of Peace, and, what is dearer than Peace, of Truth.

The circumstances of the times may fairly be considered as a sufficient reason for their original publication. But it is dangerous for any body of individuals, however small, to combine to disseminate peculiar religious opinions within the Church. It becomes still more dangerous, when their works have acquired, however improperly, a name, which compromises a great public University in no way responsible for them, and when they are put forth anonymously, and apparently with the sanction of the whole body; but, as it appears from Mr. Percival's Letter, is the case with the Tracts, without any adequate superintendence being exercised over the opinions and expressions of the individual writers. When the object of this arrangement is, as Mr. Percival's statement also indicates, to 'produce effect,' 'to be effective,' 'to please,' and 'to strike,' this bias, however unintentionally, may still farther interfere with the simple enunciation of truth. And it has now too become evident, that the continuation of the Tracts, at least in their present shape, may lead to painful collisions, not with persons incompetent to judge, but with authorities, whom we must all respect. Under these circumstances may it not be right to guard against this evil, and against

the gradual formation of a party, and the chance of driving those who differ from you still farther from what you believe to be truth, and against even the possibility of a schism—all this, when the object is accomplished, for which you first commenced your labours, and when the fundamental principles, which you have advocated, have taken root, and spread, and are advancing every day, with a rapidity, which ten years since we should have pronounced it a delusion to imagine?

I will make no apology for writing thus openly. You, who have never spoken harshly even of those who have most cruelly traduced you, will not be slow to make allowances for one who has never uttered a word or entertained a thought, either of yourself or of the other authors of the Tracts, but those of gratitude and affectionate respect.

But my name has been most improperly connected with them. And it is right that neither of us should be made responsible for any but our own opinions. And an act even of an individual so insignificant as myself may not be wholly useless at this moment, if it shews, that the movement now making in defence of the Church and of her principles is carried on by persons not connected by party spirit, or other ties than their duty to the Church—that to differ in such points, as those to which I have now objected, does not imply the least dissension on the grand

objects for which we are contending—that these very differences on detached questions will be a great security against error in those which are the most important ; and that it is possible to hold, what are supposed to be extreme opinions with respect to great Church doctrines, and at the same time to be keenly (perhaps you will say unreasonably) sensitive to any thing which seems to border either on a disparagement of our English Church, as it is at present constituted, or on the slightest needless approximation to the errors of the Church of Rome.

In conclusion I cannot but say, that although pain may be caused to individuals for the present, the discussion opened by the Tract, however unhappily commenced, seems likely to do much good, in calling our attention to the real character of our formularies, and leading us to be still more attached to them, and more grateful for the Providence, which, whatever were the thoughts of their authors, watched over their construction. Nor, I trust, can there be any fear, that the quiet, sobriety, and kind feeling, which has so long been the characteristic of the University, is likely to be disturbed on the present occasion.

Believe me, My dear Pusey,

With the sincerest esteem and regard,

Your's ever truly,

WILLIAM SEWELL.

Exeter College, March 17, 1841.

